

FOREWORD

Mark Twain wrote this high-spirited romp of a play in the winter of 1898, as he emerged from one of the deepest depressions of his life. It is printed here for the first time.

The sudden death of Twain's eldest daughter, Susy, at age twenty-four in August of 1896 had left a gaping hole in his heart. He tried to ease the pain through work, completing his travel book *Following the Equator* and starting several other projects.¹ But little that he wrote during this time suited him—"because of the deadness which invaded me when Susy died."² Grief mingled with despair: Twain had declared bankruptcy several years earlier, and there was still no sign that he would ever get out of debt.³ "I have lost three entire months, now," he wrote in early November 1897. "In that time I have begun twenty magazine articles and books—and flung every one of them aside in turn." Since last August, Twain wrote, "I have finished not *one single thing*."⁴

Twain penned these lines from Vienna, then Europe's third largest city, where he had moved his family in the fall of 1897 to indulge his twenty-three-year-old daughter Clara's musical ambitions—specifically, her desire to study piano with Theodor Leschetizky, the renowned Viennese instructor. The family's arrival in Vienna without hotel reservations on a dreary day at the end of September had been inauspicious. "No one could have believed, as we turned our lights out in our dingy rooms that night, that Vienna would ever come to seem a pleasant place," Clara recalled. The heartache that the first anniversary of Susy's death in August had brought to the surface, the continuing financial pressure, the challenge of getting his family settled in a foreign city, and, to make matters worse, an episode of gout, all added to the gloom. In early December, news arrived that Twain's brother Orion had passed away, and shortly thereafter Twain learned that his friend George

Griffin, the family's former butler in Hartford, Connecticut, had also passed away. Feeling ground down by debt and depressed by grief, Twain wrote his publisher, "It has been reported that I am writing books—for publication; I am not doing anything of the kind."⁵

But by New Year's Twain's debts were beginning to diminish, due in part to a plan for satisfying his creditors that Henry Huttleston Rogers, Twain's friend and financial adviser, had helped him devise. The gout was gone, and the family was settling in to life in Vienna. On January 14, 1898, Twain wrote in his journal: "Began to write comedy 'Is he Dead?' (François Millet.)" On January 20, Twain wrote Rogers, "Since we began to pay off the debts I have abundant peace of mind again—no sense of burden. Work is become a pleasure again—it is not labor, any longer. I am into it up to my ears, these last 3 or 4 weeks—and all *dramatic*. (I always believed I couldn't write a play that would *play*, but this one will that I am putting the finishing touches to.)" He had high hopes for success. "Yes," he continued jocularly, "I shall want seven rooms in the eleventh story of the new building next year, to conduct my dramatic business in. Please have them frescoed. Put in a billiard table. I will send you further details as they occur to me."⁶

Two days later, he wrote his friend William Dean Howells, "I have made a change lately—into dramatic work—& I find it absorbingly entertaining. I don't know that I can write a play that will play; but no matter, I'll write half a dozen that won't, anyway. Dear me, I didn't know there was such fun in it. . . . I get into immense spirits as soon as my day is fairly started." On February 5, Twain wrote Rogers that he had written a comedy entitled *Is He Dead?* "I put on the finishing touches to-day and read it to Mrs. Clemens, and she thinks it is very bully." Twain thought it was pretty good, himself.⁷

The play that lifted Twain's spirits so and that his wife found appealing as well (and she was hard to please in such matters) was not his first foray into the theatre. Indeed, *Colonel Sellers*, the very successful 1870s stage version of Twain's first effort as a novelist, had whetted his appetite for the stage and prompted him sporadically over the next two decades to try, and repeatedly fail, to follow it with another hit. But this time it was different. Twain knew that the play he had written was great fun and he wanted it to be produced. The London *Times* reported on February 4, even before Twain had added his "finishing touches," that *Is He Dead?* was to be "produced simultaneously in London and New York"—an idea that most likely came from Twain himself,

reflecting the confidence he had in the play. Twain's friend Bram Stoker, author of *Dracula*, agreed to be his theatrical agent in England. But, much to Twain's disappointment, no theatre signed on. "Put 'Is He Dead' in the fire," Twain wrote Rogers at the end of August 1898, frustrated by Stoker's and Rogers's failures to find a theatre that would produce it. "God will bless you. I too. I started in to convince myself that I could write a play or couldn't. I'm convinced. Nothing can disturb that conviction." But three months later he wrote Rogers, "It would be jolly good if some one should succeed in making a play out of 'Is He Dead?'"⁸

It never happened. Twain doesn't seem to have known that he had sent his play to Stoker to place in a theatre in England at precisely the moment when Stoker suffered a cataclysmic disaster that left him completely distracted. And Twain only partly realized that he had missed the boat, writing *Is He Dead?* just a few years too late. His play might have been snapped up by a theatre in the early 1890s, had Twain written it then, since it resembled, in some ways, the play that became the biggest worldwide theatrical hit of the decade. But by 1898, the theatre climate had changed on both sides of the Atlantic, and Twain's play was out of step with the latest fads. The play's irreverence toward an iconic figure in the arts, Jean-François Millet, may also have given some producers pause at a time when the "cult of Millet" in the United States was at its peak. Twain gave up trying to get the play produced a year after he wrote it.⁹ It remained unprinted and unproduced for a hundred and five years.

Scholars have known about *Is He Dead?* but have paid it scant attention.¹⁰ Twain's reputation as a dull playwright helped bury *Is He Dead?* alongside his other efforts in the dramatic field—most of which are well worth burying. Indeed, it was only after slogging through an entire file drawer of boring, largely unreadable plays, including the egregious *Ah Sin* and the deadly *Death Wafer*, that I came across the manuscript of *Is He Dead?* The fact that others had read Twain's last full-length comedy before and seen little remarkable about it prepared me to dismiss *Is He Dead?* with a quick perusal. But after laughing out loud in the archive, I found myself wondering, instead, why critics hadn't recognized the play for what it was—an engaging and (for Twain) unusually well-plotted comedy energized by the sly wit and insouciant humor Twain was able to muster when he was having a good time.

Is He Dead? marked the end of a period in Twain's writing life characterized mainly by fitful false starts and relatively few finished pieces in any genre.

During the productive twelve years that followed, Twain published works including "My First Lie and How I Got Out of It" (1899), "Concerning the Jews" (1899), *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg and Other Stories and Essays* (1900), "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" (1901), "A Dog's Tale" (1903), *My Début as a Literary Person, with Other Essays and Stories* (1903), *Extracts from Adam's Diary* (1904), "King Leopold's Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule" (1905), "The Czar's Soliloquy" (1905), *Eve's Diary Translated from the Original MS* (1906), "Hunting the Deceitful Turkey" (1906), *What Is Man?* (1906), *The \$30,000 Bequest and Other Stories* (1906), *Christian Science* (1907), "Chapters from My Autobiography" (1906–1907), *Extract from Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven* (1909), and *Is Shakespeare Dead?* (1909). He also wrote works that were published posthumously, including "The War Prayer," "Battle Hymn of the Republic (Brought Down to Date)," "The United States of Lyncherdom," "The Stupendous Procession," "Corn-Pone Opinions," "The Fall of the Great Republic," "Which Was It?" "Adam's Soliloquy," "Eve Speaks," "The Dervish and the Offensive Stranger," "Three Thousand Years Among the Microbes," several of "The Mysterious Stranger" manuscripts, "Letters From the Earth," and a number of other works worth writing and worth reading.¹¹

To allow the reader to experience *Is He Dead?* firsthand and to avoid giving away the plot, I will end my introductory remarks here. In the afterword, I set the play in the context of other writing by Twain (including his previous efforts to write for the stage), and other popular theatre of its time. I also examine Twain's attitudes toward art, and toward the French, and suggest why he may have chosen to write a play about the painter Jean-François Millet. I explore some possible reasons why he might have been unable to get it produced, and why a play that wouldn't play in the late 1890s might play today. For now, however, I give the reader *Is He Dead?*—the play that delighted its writer by proving to be "such fun."

SHELLEY FISHER FISHKIN